

Do you know why the Trinity matters?

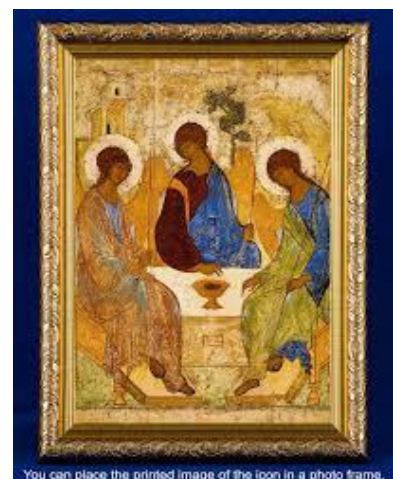
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The Trinity matters because ultimate reality is the Trinity and thus, what gives meaning to the world and human life is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In saying this, have I already lost your attention? I imagine that a great many people, including Christians, if asked 'What is the Trinity?' would begin their answer in the following way. 'It is a doctrine that ...'. And I suspect the question would conjure up in their minds the picture of a group of senile and bearded clergy sitting around a table and thinking up ways of making the Christian religion difficult for the laity. 'Ah, I have got an idea,' says the most long bearded and senile of the party twittering, as he sucks his toothless gums, 'Let's tell them that God is both three and one; that will give them something to think about.'



Now the first point I want to make is that the Trinity is not a doctrine at all. There is a doctrine about the Trinity, as there are doctrines about many other facts of existence, but, if Christianity is true, the Trinity is not a doctrine; the Trinity is God. The fact that God is Triune – that in some deep mysterious sense there are three divine Persons eternally united in one life of complete perfection and beatitude means that God is love and thus, from whom we understand what love is. God is love because there exists three persons in the Trinity. Unless there are distinct persons in the Trinity, there would be no opportunity for love in God.

But what does God's love look like? You likely have seen (and may own a copy) Andrei Rublev's famous Russian Orthodox icon The Trinity, also known as The Hospitality of Abraham. It features three young men seated around a table. In the Western Church they are called the three angelic visitors. In the Eastern Church they are called the Old Testament Trinity. It comes from the OT story of when three angels meet Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 18. The Eastern Orthodox Church call it the OT Trinity because it believes these three angels were the Trinity. Why? It tells us in Genesis 18 that 'the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre.' When Abraham looked up, he saw 'three men standing near him' and addresses them as 'my Lord'. That Abraham saw 'three' men yet addresses them in the singular, 'my' Lord, has, at least for the Orthodox Church, Trinitarian reference. You



will notice that each of the three young men in Rublev's icon are the same age? This is Rublev's way of telling us that the Son is eternally begotten. Furthermore, the three men are sitting in a circle looking at each other. This signifies that each person of the Trinity is constantly loving and glorifying the other two persons of the Trinity. Lastly, the one angel, who represents the Holy Spirit, while looking at the other two is also looking out towards us, the viewer. He is inviting us to enter and participate in the mutual love of the Trinity.

Another way to describe this intra-Trinitarian love as a dance. We say that the three persons of the Trinity are distinct. However, Jesus says, 'I am in the Father, and the Father is in me' (Jn. 14.10). How can the Son be in the Father and the Father in the Son yet remain distinct persons? The Church has a Greek term to describe this relationship between the persons of the Trinity, perichoresis. The Greek word *peri* means going around, like a periscope that goes around 360 degrees. *Chorein* means 'to make room', or 'to give way.' It is also the root word for 'choreography'. Therefore, perichoresis is used to describe how the persons of the Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are perpetually dancing in a circle of love. It is a metaphor that helps visualize the Trinity as an eternal, loving, and harmonious movement where each person makes room for the eternal dance by which they love and glorify each other.

But what does this perichoresis or eternal dance of love have to do with us? Why did the Father send His Son to this earth, to be born of a virgin called Mary, die on a Cross and then rise from the dead? Yes, so we can be forgiven of our sins and one day rise from the dead. However, the Father primarily sent His Son and now the Holy Spirit to draw us back to Himself so we can join in the eternal dance of love of between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As I write this reflection, we just celebrated Pentecost. Why did the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit? Jesus tells us that He will ask the Father to give us another Advocate, who He calls the 'Spirit of truth' (Jn. 14.16-17). What is this truth the Spirit gives us? This truth is that the path back to the Father is through Jesus. 'No one comes to the Father,' says Jesus, 'except through me' (Jn. 14.6). Jesus asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit so He can help us get onto and follow this path: 'No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father' (Jn. 6.44) in the Spirit. In other words, the Father is the goal, the Son is the path, and the Holy Spirit helps us follow the path back to our goal. To what end? To join in God's eternal dance of love! As Jesus says, 'I will ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit so you will not be alone' (Jn. 14.18).

However, unless we have a balanced understanding of the Trinity, we risk missing out participating in this trinitarian dance of love in three ways. First, if we focus on the Father at the expense of Jesus, God becomes irrelevant. This happens when in our attempt to be open minded to other religions, we downplay the exclusive claims of Jesus as Lord. Remember, we have a purpose, to return to the Father, by a certain path,

who is Jesus, and the power to do it, is the Holy Spirit. If we get rid of Jesus, or diminish His position, we have no path to the Father or the Father to us. God becomes like the 'Force' in Star Wars or elevator music, just background noise. If God is in heaven and we cannot connect with Him, whatever happens on this earth is all up to us. God is just background noise, a fact of nature, and thus, irrelevant to us.

Second, if we focus just on Jesus at the expense of the Father, we are left with no God-given purpose in life. Remember, Jesus is our path to the Father. He brings us to our goal, who is the Father. When we focus on Jesus at the expense of the Father, it is usually because we want to reduce Christ to His humanity and discard, what we think is untenable, that Jesus is also God. We want to focus just on Christ's humanity by getting rid of His divinity because we think it will make him more approachable. In fact, the opposite happens. Instead of Jesus being a path or 'window' into participating in an intimate relationship with the Father, instead, He becomes a 'mirror', reflecting to us whatever we want to believe and do. Jesus becomes a mentor or advisor rather than our Lord whose advice we can take or leave.

Lastly, when we focus just on the Holy Spirit, we forget what is most important about the Father's love that He offers us through His Son, Jesus, the Father! The best thing about a gift is it tells you that that person loves you. The gift itself is not as important as the reason why the person gave you the gift, because she loves you! When we only focus on the Holy Spirit, which is what happened in the Church of Corinth, we are more concerned with the gifts of the Spirit rather than the giver of gift, God Himself. When we focus on the gifts of the Spirit rather than the giver, the Father and Jesus, we end up worrying about how 'spiritual' we are, more concerned with 'my spirituality,' and whether we are being recognized by others in the Church for my spiritual gifts, rather than, on humbly getting on with walking on the path with Jesus serving and caring for others for which we were given these gifts in the first place.

I began this reflect by saying the Trinity matters because ultimate reality is the Trinity. If the Trinity is love, then ultimate reality is love. But how do we participate in this love of God so that it shapes our lives? We do so, primarily, every Sunday when we worship and celebrate the Eucharist. Sunday morning is about celebrating and joining in the Trinitarian dance of love. When we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we are spiritually, nevertheless really, taken up and united to the ascended and glorified Jesus so we can, by the power of the Spirit join in the divine dance of love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus, whenever we partake in the Eucharist, we are equipped to love others as God loves us. How can this be? That is where faith comes in. Faith is believing in what we do not see with our senses yet believe is real. If you believe Jesus truly died for you, rose from the dead and has ascended to heaven to be with His Father, surely, there is more happening in the Eucharist than meets the eye?